

## “Man Has Lived in Vain”

There are a few things (if there are any at all) which are worse than death — our own death. The real tragedy of a life's end is that the dead person, his life and his achievements are usually forgotten after a certain period. For this reason it may be claimed that most people have lived in vain, since they are unable to achieve Earthly Immortality, i. e. being remembered for a long while after their death by the people living. (The immortality of the soul given by God is the privilege only of the faithful, therefore, I am not concerned to occupy with the religious aspect of this question.) In this essay I wish to compare and examine two short stories which are about the death of a community; about fatal accidents which can happen to any living soul: H. G. Wells' "The Star"<sup>1</sup> and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Ambitious Guest."<sup>2</sup> The narrators in both stories anticipate the imminent catastrophe, and show the characters' most personal thoughts, feelings about death and Earthly Immortality: facing these premature, catastrophic deaths the reader may consider one's life to be in vain.

Even though the main theme of these literary works is universal and — in my own opinion — interesting to every reader, these short stories are seemingly neglected by critics, as a rather small amount of articles and critical analyses have been written about them. In the case of H. G. Wells the problem might be that his novels, such as *The Time Machine* or *The War of the Worlds*, enjoy bigger success and appreciation than his short fiction. The case of "The Ambitious Guest" is rather similar to that of "The Star" owing to the fact that fewer critical analyses were published about it, compared to such works by Hawthorne as "Young Goodman Brown," "Rappaccini's Daughter" – not to mention his novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Still, "The Ambitious Guest" is at least mentioned in some critical works concerned with Hawthorne's short fiction.

I opted for comparing these two short stories because they have some interesting similarities. For example, their topic is a well-known, universal one about the premature and unnatural death of people caused by an accident. In "The Star" a comet (or as the readers get to know at the end of the short story a Martian missile) almost collides with the Earth. Since the collision does not happen, the whole destruction of the planet and its inhabitants does not occur, however, the passing-by "object" causes dramatic climate change and kills millions of

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<sup>1</sup> H. G. WELLS, "The Star," in: *The Door in the Wall and Other Stories*, 1<sup>st</sup> World Library, 2006. ISBN: 978-1-4218-3342-2. pp. 28-40.

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel HAWTHORNE, "The Ambitious Guest," in: *Selected Tales and Sketches*, selected and Introduction by Michael J. COLACURCIO, London: Penguin, 1987. pp. 162-171.

people and communities. Briefly, “The Star” is about the future of the Earth and its inhabitants. H. G. Wells is willing to foreshadow the (possible) future of mankind in his writings. As Francis Wheen noted, “Wells cannot resist bringing out his crystal ball occasionally.”<sup>3</sup> “The Star” in its theme and construction (not to mention the fact that one of the characters, Ogilvy, appears in both writings) shows similarities with *The War of the Worlds*. It might happen that the short story is a kind of prequel to the famous novel (however, the question has not been analysed by critics yet). If this is true, then according to Warren Wagar, “The Star”, just like *The War of the Worlds*, “may be construed in various ways, as horror tale, apocalypse, political fantasia.”<sup>4</sup>

“The Ambitious Guest” is about the death of one particular community, a family, due to an avalanche. Hawthorne’s short story is based on an actual event, very well-known at the time, which is told (or at least mentioned) by every critic and editor of the work. In my own opinion, the original story is important for critics in order to emphasize the author’s source of inspiration, and the fact that it was a probable and frequent incident in Hawthorne’s time. John F. Sears in his book *Sacred Places. American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* dedicates a whole chapter to the catastrophe which inspired Hawthorne, claiming that “the Willey disaster was not just news; it was a cultural event.”<sup>5</sup> Among the critics whose works I have read, Sears describes the Willey incident in the most detailed way:

On the night of August 28, 1826, numerous avalanches devastated the slopes of the White Mountains, stripping away trees, earth and rock, and leaving deep gashes in the mountainsides that remained visible for years afterward. One of these avalanches wiped out the entire family of Samuel Willey, Jr.: Mr. Willey and his wife, five children between the ages of five and thirteen, a hired man and a boy. The Willeys lived in what is now called Crawford Notch, a wild and lonely spot six miles from the nearest neighbor. They tended a small farm and they took in travelers who passed through to Notch on their way to the coast of Maine. On June, 28, 1826, the Willeys had been frightened by another avalanche that descended close to their home and Mr. Willey had taken the precaution of constructing a shelter to which they could flee in case they were threatened again. They apparently tried to reach that shelter on the night of August 28, but fled right into the path of an oncoming slide. Their house, however, remained unharmed; had they stayed within it, they would all have been saved. One of the avalanches had originated at the top of the mountain above the Willey’s house and descended directly towards it, but just before it reached the house it divided in two, passed by on either side – destroying the

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<sup>3</sup> “Introduction,” in: H. G. WELLS, *A Modern Utopia*, Introduction by Francis WHEEN, London: Penguin, 2005. p. xv.

<sup>4</sup> W. Warren WAGAR, “H. G. Wells and the Scientific Imagination,” in: *H. G. Wells*, ed. and Introduction by Harold BLOOM, Chelsea: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005. p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> John F. SEARS, *Sacred Places. American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998. p. 74.

stable on its way – and reunited lower down in the valley. The next morning a rescue party found an empty house, with beds unmade and the family's clothing lying on chairs and on the floor, just as they had left it in their panicked flight. Three of the bodies were never recovered from the wreckage on the valley floor.<sup>6</sup>

The story is more or less told in the same way by other critics. For instance, James McIntosh in the short story's footnote tells the same accident, but his description of the event is rather brief. He does not mention that two hired persons were in the house with the family, but expresses the probability of a guest having been in the house saying that "a guest might have well perished with them."<sup>7</sup> In the short story collection entitled *The Great Stone Face*, the anonymous author of the introduction claims that the avalanches were caused by the heavy rain, which loosened the surface of the mountain. The other details of the story are similar to Sears' version.<sup>8</sup> Every critic found necessary to underline the fact that if the family had stayed in their house, they would have survived. Colacurcio in his introduction to the *Selected Tales and Sketches* writes that "this [*Selected Tales*] collection includes only one compound example of 'what might have been': 'The Ambitious Guest' (1835), a moralized tale of what might be called insecurity of nature, and which appears to echo Jonathan Edward's infamous 'Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God'."<sup>9</sup>

In both of the two examined short stories the narrator speaks in third person singular. In Wells' story the narrator is an omniscient one. As Brian Aldiss remarks in the introduction to *The War of the Worlds*, the narrator in Wells' works is usually an unnamed one<sup>10</sup>, which is true also in the case of "The Star". He sees the whole Earth as a unit, and describes the destruction of floods, earthquakes and volcano eruptions in every corner of the planet. He does not only see the Earth, but the whole universe as well, since he tells us the destruction of Neptune and knows that there are astronomers on Mars (and interestingly, he even understands their language). This narrator is so omniscient, that he could be regarded as a kind of god who is looking at the universe from an outsider's point view, but can focus on small parts (on continents, countries or even on the master mathematician's room) as well.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, pp. 72-73. The same story was published in John F. SEARS, "Hawthorne's 'The Ambitious Guest' and the Significance of the Willey Disaster," in: *American Literature*, Vol. 54., No. 3. (Oct., 1982) p. 354.

<http://www.jstor.org/pss/2925848>

<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel HAWTHORNE, "The Ambitious Guest," in: *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*, ed. and Introduction written by James MCINTOSH, New York: Norton, 1987. p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr.: "Introduction," in: Nathaniel HAWTHORNE, *The Great Stone Face*, 1<sup>st</sup> World Library, 2004. ISBN: 1-59540-113-X

<sup>9</sup> "Introduction," in: *Selected Tales and Sketches*, selected and Introduction by Michael J. COLACURCIO, London: Penguin, 1987. pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr.: "Introduction," in: H. G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, Introduction by Brian ALDISS, London: Penguin, 2005.

Even though he is an authoritative, rather calm and objective narrator, his writing does not lack human feelings and personal opinion. For example, he uses harsh adjectives to criticise those people who did not believe the astronomers and mathematicians: “Common sense was sturdy everywhere, scornful, jesting, a little inclined to persecute the obdurate fearful.”<sup>11</sup> Still, he has got sympathy for the deceased and the living as well, for instance, the description of the worn-out mathematician is rather moving.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the narrator of “The Ambitious Guest” is not such a god-like figure. Seemingly he is an omniscient story-teller, although he does not describe every thought of the characters and is keen on asking questions: “Is not the kindred of a common fate a closer tie than that of birth?”<sup>13</sup> What is more, sometimes he only guesses what happens or has happened using the word “perhaps” and modal auxiliaries like “might”: “Perhaps a gem of love was springing in their hearts, so pure that it might blossom in Paradise, since it could not be matured on Earth...”<sup>14</sup> Due to these uncertainties the reader can be sure that the narrator is a human figure who is very much concerned with the topic of his work (being a mortal human he has to be moved by the theme). Towards the end of the short story he becomes more agitated and exclaims: “Alas! They had quitted their security, and fled right into the pathway of destruction.”<sup>15</sup> But he has always more questions, indeed, he closes his writing with exclamations and another question.

Seemingly, the two narrators are not really similar, except for their topic. However, both of them use a special narration technique: they make remarks on the imminent catastrophe, in this way preparing the readers for the tragic ending. With this technique the narrators manage to create a closer connection with the readers, and arouse stronger emotions in them, which brings the audience to the shocking conclusion that they may face the same fate as the characters in the short stories. In Wells’ short story the reader from the first paragraph is aware of the danger of a destructive collision which is made clear and more frightful by the scientists, especially by the master mathematician’s dark prophecy.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the narrator deliberately uses sinister words and expressions, for example, he calls the missile “the star of the coming doom.”<sup>17</sup> In Hawthorne’s story the narrator constantly calls our attention to the approaching sorrowful fate of the characters. A perfect example for

<sup>11</sup> H. G. WELLS, “The Star,” p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Ivi, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Nathaniel HAWTHORNE, “The Ambitious Guest,” p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 168.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> “‘Earthquakes, volcanic outbreaks, cyclones, sea waves, floods, and a steady rise in temperature to I know what limit’ – so prophesied the master mathematician.” H. G. WELLS, “The Star,” p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

this is when the love between the guest and the eldest daughter is mentioned: “since it [their love] could not be matured on Earth.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, there are plentiful allusions to death and graves. These anticipatory, ominous atmosphere-creating parts are followed by the description of the catastrophe (of course in Wells’ story this part is longer due to the fact that the narrator has to describe all parts of the Earth). Right after the climax the readers can catch only a glimpse of the future. In “The Ambitious Guest” we get to know that the family’s tragedy became a famous story sung by poets, whereas in “The Star” it is mentioned that there were survivors on the Earth who would rebuild civilisation, but the narrator himself says that all these details “this story does not tell.”<sup>19</sup> In both of the short stories the final paragraphs are not about the story (death of a community) any more, but they contain a universal declaration which makes the reader think about the story after reading, and compare the plot and the happenings with his own life. Wells achieves this by reducing the always growing tension in the last paragraph, declaring that the importance of something depends only on the point of view (according to the Martians, who live millions of miles away from the Earth, the planet did not suffer particular changes), and even the greatest catastrophes are unimportant for outsiders.

Hawthorne, on the contrary, constantly increases tension. The fact that the family is being mourned and remembered renders the death of the forgotten guest more miserable and sorrowful. As John F. Sears wrote, “The obvious irony of ‘The Ambitious Guest’ is that the family achieves in death the immortality that the youth so passionately wished for.”<sup>20</sup> Then adds: “But it is also ironic that just before the members of the family acquire what the youth always wanted, he achieves the human closeness they had always enjoyed, but that he had foregone in the solitude of his quest.”<sup>21</sup> In this way we might claim that the guest gets something in exchange for his lost dream. Nevertheless, he cannot enjoy it for a long time. The last paragraph of the short story calls our attention to the fact that everybody has dreams, but many do not manage to realise them. The story ends with a question, forcing the reader to give an answer to it. Therefore, these short stories about the death of unknown persons make the audience think about their own existence and ask the question whether their life is in vain or not.

When can we say that we did not live in vain? Probably if we are remembered after our death. Many (ordinary) people would be contented with a gravestone like the father in the

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<sup>18</sup> Nathaniel HAWTHORNE, “The Ambitious Guest,” p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> H. G. WELLS, “The Star,” p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> John F. SEARS, *Sacred Places. American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Hawthorne story. Others, however, seek something more durable: Earthly Immortality, the privilege of great men who during their life worked as scientists or artists to help mankind and advance progress. For such immortality longs the ambitious guest and presumably the scientist in “The Star”. Unfortunately, in the end the guest - whose existence was unknown for everyone – does not even get a gravestone, whereas the family which had the same terrible fate is remembered and mourned not only by the neighbours and friends, but by poets as well. Therefore, they manage to attain Earthly Immortality, even if they did not seek it. Nevertheless, this kind of immortality and even the simplest graves are unnecessary and worthless if whole civilisations are wiped out as in “The Star”. In Wells’ short story we do not really know what desires and dreams the individuals may have, we can only guess. Still, at death’s door doubtlessly the biggest desire of people is survival. Moved by this desire and instincts in Wells’ story the people try to find shelter in the mountains and on the open sea, which turns out to be a good idea. On the other hand, in Hawthorne’s work fleeing from the house causes the death of the family and the guest. They are in this way punished for not having trust in Providence, and their fate becomes a moral teaching for religious (especially Puritan) persons. Wells’ story, being a science fiction one, lacks Providence and religious assumptions, the survivors are only the “lucky ones” who escape death owing to the Moon and their own decisions.

We shall not forget to compare the two “protagonists” of the short stories: the ambitious guest and the destructive star. Both of them are described in detail, we know about the guest’s aims and desires just as we are given information on the star which is in fact a missile. They can be considered as two extremes: the star causes death and destruction, while the guest is the one who suffers from the anger of the mountain. The guest is a human being and does not manage to achieve his desire to gain fame after his death, whereas the star, even though it is only an inanimate object, has more effect on mankind and the Earth than any living person could ever have. We may also suppose that the star has achieved even Earthly Immortality, since the surviving groups of men will probably remember it and tell its story even long afterwards.

Does being forgotten mean that the person has really lived in vain? In my own opinion, and according to the short stories, it does not. The master mathematician fights with the star, knowing that the human brain and consciousness is greater and more powerful than anything else in the universe saying: “You may kill me, he said after a silence. ’But I can hold you – and all the universe for that matter – in the grip of this little brain. I would not

change. Even now.”<sup>22</sup> His dark, resigned announcement that “Man has lived in vain”<sup>23</sup> will not become true, since the whole Earth will not be destroyed, and there will be survivors who would carry on building, observing and creating. In this way even though the master mathematician dies, mankind lives on. As stated by Justin E. A. Busch, for Wells it is not important who survives the catastrophe and who does not, and personal immortality does not have sense at all:

[...] Wells finds a fixation on personal immortality to be [...] debilitating. Worrying about what comes after death is at best unproductive and at worst destructive of the individual’s mental life. Wells sees the best way to overcome the fear of personal death as lying in a direct confrontation with, and acknowledgement of, its inevitability.

For Wells, death is a random event in a random world. It comes, and there is nothing to be done about the fact (that it can be postponed by advances in medicine is irrelevant; on the scale of evolution it makes no difference whether we live seventy or seventy times seventy years).<sup>24</sup>

This resignation concerning death was something that the family and the guest in Hawthorne’s short story did not know. There was none of them, who did not want to live longer. This was what caused in the end their death. Therefore, Busch is right when he claims that fear from death is destructive (both in the short and in the long run). If they had not want to escape from the avalanche, they could have survived. Even though the family died and the guest was forgotten, their life and tragic death was not in vain, as many people went to see their house and a gravestone was erected for all of them. What is more, their tragic fate was told by common people and artists as well, in order to show an example and teach the following generations that man has to trust in Providence. As Alison Easton in her book notices, but for the tragic death of the family, the story would not have been written:

‘The Ambitious Guest’ demonstrates that the domestic scene has no ‘story’ until an unusual catastrophe occurs and legends can be made of it. If the characters in that tale had remained in the house, they would have survived, but there would then have been no story; indeed, to create narrative interest Hawthorne added the young man to the facts he had been given, and the tale thrives on might-have-beens and conjecture.<sup>25</sup>

Although in this citation the character of the guest is regarded only as a successful “trick” to create stronger emotions in readers; the guest’s importance for being the representation of human desire for immortality is undeniable. The unknown (and maybe

<sup>22</sup> H. G. WELLS, “The Star,” p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Justin E. A. BUSCH, *Utopian Vision of H. G. Wells*, Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2009. p. 159.

<sup>25</sup> Alison EASTON, *The Making of the Hawthorne Subject*, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1996. p. 90.

invented) guest perishes, but not the ideals and dreams he represented, which live longer in other persons, and will never disappear from man.

To sum it up, these short stories are about ordinary men with whom readers can easily identify themselves. Both of them are about desires for life and immortality which can be given only to a few persons. Even though the two short stories are rather different, since their morals and their attitude towards universal and individual death show great dissimilarities, they have the same effect on the reader's psyche. This proves that the short stories characters with the flesh-and-blood authors have not lived in vain.



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